



## Felicitas von Woedtke Daniel Richter's Dance on the Ruins: the Catastrophe as Spectacle

When Daniel Richter was growing up in the small East Holstein town of Lütjenburg during the 1960s and 1970s, little suggested that he would one day become an internationally celebrated artist. His mother ran a café, while his father drove trucks before later working for an insurance company. Far removed from the cultural capitals of the art world, Lütjenburg was hardly a place one would associate with artistic ambition. Yet Richter has often described his childhood there as anything but unhappy. As the saying goes, "there must be something in the water," for the quiet town produced not just one but two young men who would

go on to achieve remarkable fame. One of Richter's early companions was Rocko Schamoni, who later immortalized their shared youth in the novel *Dorfpunks*.

Even amid this seemingly sleepy provincial setting, Richter's political consciousness began to emerge early. He designed flyers and voiced his views fearlessly. Raised in a working-class household with a left-leaning, social democratic outlook, he was shaped in part by his politically engaged father, who introduced him to museums and regularly took him to nearby Kiel.

By the late 1970s, the village punk had become an urban punk in Hamburg, where he immersed himself in the city's left-autonomous scene surrounding Hafensstraße. During the 1980s, painting was not yet a serious pursuit for Richter. His first artistic work emerged through the design of album covers for bands such as *Die Goldenen Zitronen*, released through the alternative label Buback, which Richter himself would later acquire in 2005, saving it from closure.

The fall of the Berlin Wall marked a profound turning point in Richter's life. The collapse of the Eastern Bloc triggered a personal crisis, as the political ideologies with which he had identified were suddenly regarded as failed systems, vulnerable to the very abuses of power they had once opposed.

In response, Richter reassessed his direction and resolved to commit himself fully to art. In 1991, he enrolled at the Hamburg University of Fine Arts, studying under Werner Büttner until 1995. Ironically, he was expelled in the very same year he staged his first solo exhibition. From that point onward, his rise was rapid. Interest in the young painter grew quickly, both in Germany and internationally.

Richter initially devoted himself to large-scale abstract compositions. At a time when painting was once again being declared obsolete during the 1990s, and art academies encouraged restraint and reduction, Richter embraced excess instead. His canvases were dense, layered, and unapologetically overloaded. In the early 2000s, he turned toward figuration without abandoning the intensity of his abstract phase. His paintings remained visually explosive, characterized by vivid colour and charged dynamism.



Lot 21

The body of work to which *Die Verschaffung des Guten* belongs is now considered among the most sought-after within Richter's oeuvre. These monumental figurative paintings regularly achieve high prices on the international auction market and are regarded as key works of his career. One painting from this period, *Tarifa* (2001), became the first Richter work to surpass one million euros at auction in 2020.

During these years, Richter developed compositions that both invoke and deliberately subvert the tradition of history painting. His works are saturated with references to contemporary history and mass media, while violence and social conflict occupy a central role. As curator Eva Meyer-Hermann observed, "through figuration, political and social reality entered the paintings." Yet Richter maintains a clear distance from the grand narratives of classical history painting. His works do not glorify or monumentalize; they reject pathos in favor of fractured, unsettling visions of the present. Within these paintings, Richter grapples with major historical ruptures and collective traumas - including the end of fascism, the collapse of socialism, and the failure of social utopias. As the artist himself has remarked: "Basically, I take something sad or historically very heavy and transform it into cheerful painting."

The painting *Die Verschaffung des Guten* presents an apocalyptic landscape through which the remnants of a circus procession move. Everything has been burned. The ground is littered with debris, while in the background stands the ruin of a building, reduced to a single surviving fragment of wall. The sky glows in deep reds and pinks, as though the fires of destruction were still smoldering. Little living presence remains.

At the center of the composition stand two revue dancers, still dressed in leotards, knee-high boots, and top hats. Circular markings resembling targets are painted onto their stomachs. Beside them rise the charred stumps of two trees, structuring the scene like a ruined gateway. Several small birds perch on their branches. To the left, a shadowy figure rides an elephant draped with the remnants of an American flag. The painting radiates violence, intensified by its dominant red tones. A torn white flag flutters at the edge of the composition, though surrender appears to have come too late to prevent catastrophe.

Richter's pictorial worlds remain deliberately enigmatic. They resist fixed interpretation and instead function as condensed fields of cultural imagery that reveal new meanings depending on perspective and historical moment. Many

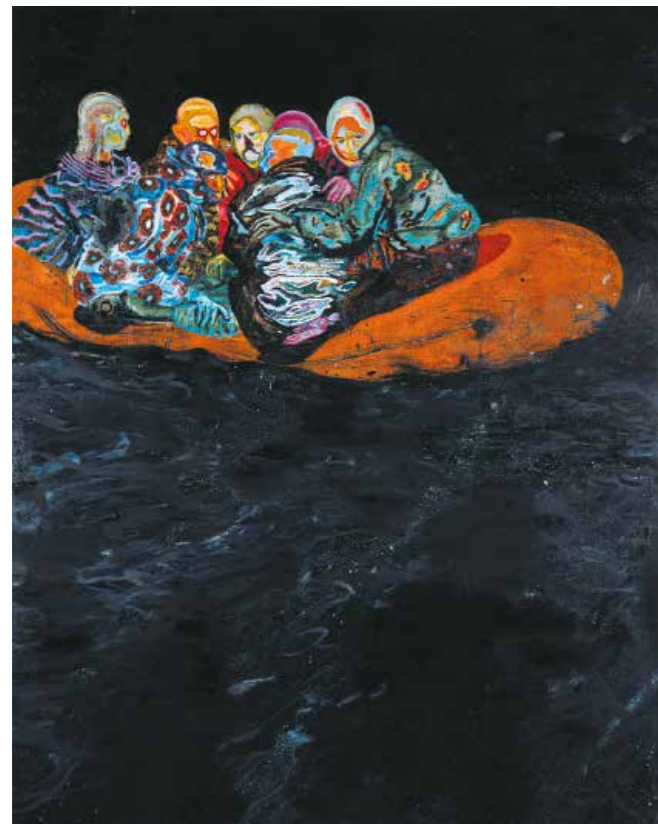
motifs appear strangely familiar because Richter draws upon a vast archive of nineteenth- and twentieth-century visual culture, yet they ultimately evade precise identification. This ambiguity is entirely intentional. The scenes operate less as references to specific events than as allegories of broader political and social conditions.

Here, the circus becomes a powerful metaphor for spectacle, entertainment, and the seduction of audiences. The dancers in their stage costumes can be read as symbols of performative identity - roles placed under attack. The elephant traditionally signifies power and strength, while the fragment of the American flag points toward the destabilization or deconstruction of national identity.

Seen in the context of 2003, the painting can also be understood in relation to the geopolitical climate following 9/11. Many of Richter's figurative works from the early 2000s grapple with the transformed world order that emerged after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact. In 2003, the United States - long positioned during the Cold War as the defender of the "free world" against the Soviet Union - invaded Iraq under highly contested legal circumstances as part of its "War on Terror," the consequences of which continue to shape the region today.

Even the title is revealing in this context. "The Good" does not appear here as a moral absolute, but rather as a historically and politically constructed designation. The notion of "procurement" or "production" embedded in the title suggests the active creation and enforcement of meaning, always entangled within structures of power and violence.

What is remarkable is the painting's continued immediacy more than two decades after its creation. When Richter painted the work, the Western world was still experiencing a period of relative stability and economic optimism. The world wars had receded into distant historical memory, and the turn of the millennium was widely associated with ideas of progress and renewal. Today, those certainties appear profoundly shaken. Wars, pandemics, economic crises, and climate change have fundamentally altered our expectations of the future. This renewed relevance underscores the work's power beyond the realm of historical commentary alone: Richter condenses his visual language into a compelling and enduring form whose significance extends far beyond the moment of its creation.



Daniel Richter. "Tarifa". 2001. Oil/canvas. Private Collection



taz, front page from 11 September 2002

## 21 Daniel Richter

Eutin 1962 – lives in Berlin and Hamburg

“Die Verschaffung des Guten”. 2003

Oil on canvas. 242 × 270 cm (95 ¼ × 106 ¼ in.). Signed and dated at the center of the right edge: Daniel RICHTER 03. On the stretcher frame with labels and stamps from Galerie Contemporary Fine Arts, Berlin, and additionally inscribed multiple times in black felt-tip pen: DR 144. The painting is registered in the catalogue raisonné of Daniel Richter’s paintings compiled by Dr. Eva Meyer-Hermann. [3172] Framed.

### Provenance

Private Collection, North Rhine-Westphalia (acquired in 2003 at Bernier/Eliades Gallery, Athens)

EUR 300,000–400,000

USD 353,000–471,000

### Exhibition

Daniel Richter. Athens, Bernier/Eliades, 2003 / Daniel Richter. Pink Flag. White Horse. Toronto, The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery; Vancouver, Belkin Art Gallery, University of British Columbia; Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada, 2004–06, ill. p. 30 / Rockers Island. Essen, Museum Folkwang, 2007, ill. p. 162 / Wahlverwandtschaften. Deutsche Kunst seit den späten 1960er Jahren. Riga, Latvian National Museum of Art, 2016, ill. p. 158

